

SOUTH PAHROC RANGE WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 28,600 acres

The South Pahroc Range Wilderness Study Area (WSA), NV-050-132, is located in Lincoln County, approximately 30 miles west of Caliente, and 120 miles north of Las Vegas. The WSA contains 28,600 acres of BLM lands with no split estate or private inholdings. A powerline road bounds the northern portion of the WSA, while approximately 1.2 miles of the northeastern boundary skirts existing perlite claims. The eastern and southern boundaries of the study area follow the approximate base of the major escarpment. On the unit's west side, the study area is bounded for a distance of 3 miles by an unpaved road that parallels the base of the mountain.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE - 28,395 acres recommended for wilderness 205 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The 28,395 acre area is recommended for wilderness designation because it is natural and provides outstanding opportunities for both solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. The area is manageable as wilderness due primarily to the extreme ruggedness and relative inaccessibility of much of the area.

Conflicts with other resource uses of the portion recommended for wilderness designation are minimal. Grazing use of the area will be allowed to continue. Within the 28,395 acres recommended suitable for wilderness, there are no mining claims as of the date of this report. Identified mineral values within this area include a subeconomic perlite resource, anomalous concentrations of gold, arsenic and antimony, and moderate resource potential for disseminated gold. Oil and gas leases are located along the western edge of the WSA and extend from the adjacent valley into the study area. Identified resource potential for oil and gas and geothermal energy is low.

The 205 acres recommended for uses other than wilderness lie on the far northeastern corner of the South Pahroc Range WSA and are encumbered by pre-FLPMA mining claims filed for perlite. This area is adjacent to an operating perlite mine and is susceptible to a logical extension of the mining operation. Present mining is primarily by underground methods on the steep escarpment; extension of this operation would be screened from the remainder of the WSA by the steep eastern escarpment.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The 28,395 acres recommended for wilderness are predominantly natural. The area is extremely rugged with deeply cut canyons, high ridges, large rounded boulders and heavily forested expanses. Most of the South Pahroc Range is a solitary volcanic massif composed of varying colored layers of welded tuff that have weathered into unusual pockets, columns and stone faces.

The majority of the area is free of man's imprints. A one mile way runs southerly from the north end of the unit. Along the eastern and western boundaries there are pipelines and stock developments consisting of corrals, fences, tanks and earthen reservoirs associated with three developed springs. These are localized imprints visible only from the immediate vicinity. A powerline runs along the northern boundary and a perlite mine, consisting of open pit and tunneling operations, is situated just outside the northeastern boundary of the WSA. These unnatural features are largely screened from the remainder of the WSA by the steep eastern escarpment and thus have little effect on the wilderness values.

The 205 acres recommended for release from wilderness designation is in essentially natural condition. This

area contains pre-FLPMA mining claims filed for perlite. Should these claims prove valid under the test of validity examination, development would be anticipated. The northeast corner of this area is adjacent to an operating perlite mine; naturalness values are diminished in the immediate vicinity of this operation.

B. Solitude: The area recommended for wilderness designation contains outstanding opportunities for solitude. Nearly the entire mountain range is enclosed within this area, creating an "island in the sky" effect. Moderately deep, steep-walled drainages cut across the mountain from east to west. Differential weathering of welded tuff layers has created numerous pockets, holes, columns and the ubiquitous, large rounded boulders that provide excellent topographic screening. These geologic features are heavily interlaced with stands of pinyon-juniper, white fir and aspen forming isolated glades in which a person is isolated from even relatively nearby groups. The overall effect of these differing qualities is to provide a large area where outstanding solitude is complemented by natural and scenic wonder.

Within the 205 acres recommended for uses other than wilderness, the opportunities for solitude are diminished by the comparative openness of the terrain and the sparseness of vegetative cover. Much of this area is gently rolling bajada; the ubiquitous large tuff boulders are less numerous in this region and the stands of pinyon-juniper less dense. Grasses cover substantial portions of the landscape, providing little vegetative screening.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: The 28,395 acre area recommended for wilderness designation, by virtue of its size, terrain diversity and vegetation, provides outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. The high ridge, steep canyons, and large boulders provide ample day and overnight hiking, camping and climbing or scrambling opportunities. Wildlife viewing includes mule deer, mountain lion, newly reintroduced bighorn sheep, golden eagles and prairie falcons. Hunting is known to occur along the flanks of the WSA, but the level of activity within the interior is unknown.

Numerous steep-walled drainages cut across the mountain from east to west; precipitous cliffs create vantage points for hikers that provide an impressive view of huge empty desert valleys, interrupted only by successive intervening chains of even more distant mountains. Overlying this pattern is a jumbled mosaic of small to house-sized rounded tuff boulders, heavily interlaced with pinyon and juniper, occasional white fir and aspen. Backpackers and rockscramblers would enjoy challenging climbs that culminate in scenic overlooks atop these gargantuan geologic features. Within secluded forested pockets, campers and photographers might observe mule deer, mountain lion, bighorn sheep or a variety of raptors, including golden eagles and prairie falcons. Unique rounded rocks, columns, stone faces, balancing rocks which look like stacked bagels, and expansive scenery make interesting subjects for study and photography. These features combine to enhance the recreational values contained within the South Pahroc Range WSA.

Within the area not recommended for wilderness designation, the opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation are limited. The rolling bajada terrain and paucity of large boulders reduces the number of climbing and scrambling locales. Sparse stands of pinyon-juniper and open, grassy knolls provide few secluded locales for camping. Scenic vistas for sightseeing and nature photography are generally unavailable in this region.

D. Special Features: Several special features supplement the wilderness values of the 28,395 acres recommended for wilderness designation. This "island in the sky" is comprised of west-tilting layers of tuff that have weathered into the area's unique pockets, holes, columns and house-sized rounded tuff boulders. Opalescent feldspar crystals, obsidian "Apache tears", and perlite occur in local deposits and are of interest to specimen collectors.

Living resources include the regionally rare white fir, aspen, prairie falcons, golden eagles, and mountain lions. Their presence in this WSA offers excellent opportunities for scientific observation.

The scenic qualities of the South Pahroc Range are outstanding due, in part, to the interaction of the mountain

landforms, the multi-colored rock stratigraphy, the variably-sized rounded boulders, diverse vegetation and vast, open vistas.

4. MANAGEABILITY: The 28,395 acres recommended for wilderness designation can reasonably be managed to preserve the exceptional wilderness values now present in the area. The ruggedness of the terrain makes it inaccessible to motorized vehicles, and no mining claims exist within this area. Oil and gas leases extend into a small part of the western WSA; a low resource potential for oil and gas has been identified in this region and development of these leases is not anticipated to occur. The 205 acres in the northeast corner of the WSA not recommended for wilderness designation are judged not to be as easily managed for wilderness. The upland portions of this area are encumbered by pre-FLPMA mining claims which are projected to be developed as an extension of an operating perlite mine. The eastern fringes of this corner of the WSA are bajadas which would permit vehicular access to limited areas.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The northeast portion of the WSA contains an identified, subeconomic perlite resource of about 6 million tons. Three perlite placer claims lie partly within the study area. A localized area along the southeastern border of the WSA contains anomalous concentrations of gold, arsenic, and antimony and has moderate mineral resource potential for disseminated gold. It is unlikely that this resource will be developed. There is a low resource potential for oil and gas and no potential for geothermal energy resources in the WSA.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

During formal public review of the draft EIS, a total of 157 comments specifically addressing this WSA were received. Of those, 157 were written and 3 were oral statements received at the two public hearings on the EIS. In general, 54 commentators supported more wilderness than the proposed action, 100 commentators supported the proposed action and three commentators supported less wilderness than the proposed action.

Most comments which specifically mentioned the South Pahroc Range WSA touched on high wilderness values (naturalness, outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation), high scenic values (rugged rocky terrain, deep canyon topography and dense forest vegetation and the lack of conflicts with other resource uses. Comments opposing wilderness centered around conflicts with mineral potential of the WSA.

County: No comments were received from county agencies or officials.

State: The Governor of Nevada, in his consistency letter dated September 17, 1985, supported the Bureau's Preferred Alternative. The Nevada Department of Wildlife expressed concerns that wilderness designation could hinder the reintroduction of bighorn sheep and the development of water sources. If these problems could be resolved, this agency would support the Preferred Alternative.

Federal: The U.S. Bureau of Mines suggested a boundary change along the east side of the study area to exclude the tuff unit containing perlite potential.